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ABSTRACT

This document describes research pertaining to adolescent females' perceptions of sexual desire. It analyzes 30 interviews of girls, 15-18 years old, who are juniors in suburban and urban high schools. The key finding was identified as the dilemma of desire. Girls responded to the dilemma in three ways: simply not feeling the desire, resisting their own desire, or making a claim to their own desire. No pattern was found of race, ethnicity, or social location in each of these resolutions voiced by the girls. A narrative of one female's sexual encounters and a description of her sexuality is included.. Sexual desire, like all other forms of desire, can be empowering, instrumental in girls' confidence in themselves, essential to their agency, a compass for making decisions about relationships and sexuality, and a road to knowledge about self and relationships. We have to make it possible for girls to get beyond "it just happened" by fighting for girls' right to feel and act upon their own sexual feelings without having to be encumbered by the dilemma of desire. (Author/JDM)

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# Getting Beyond "It Just Happened":

# Adolescent Girls' Experiences of Sexual Desire

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I want to begin with a few transgressions. I admit that I was an adolescent girl. I admit that I felt powerful sexual desire as an adolescent girl. And I admit that this experience has been instrumental in my research on adolescent girls' experiences of sexual desire. Perhaps that is why, for me, the answer given by the vast majority of adolescent girls when asked how and why they had sexual intercourse, "it just happened," has been somewhat puzzling. I admit that for me, it did not "just happen." Rather than an absence of actors and actions, in my adolescent sexual experiences, there was a desiring subject: and she was me.

Relying on my own experience as an anchor through the denial of female adolescent sexual desire in psychology, I set out to discover what girls had to say about this part of their lives. Based on my own experience, I believed that sexual desire in female adolescence was not only normal, but normative, and that we psychologists just didn't know about it, because no one had asked. And so, I have been working for quite a long time to get beyond "it just happened" by finding out what adolescent girls' experiences of sexual desire are like.

Primarily, my analysis has been grounded in thirty interviews I did with 15-18 year old girls who were juniors in public schools, one suburban and one urban, girls who were White and African American and Latina, who were Catholic, Protestant and Jewish, 27 of whom were heterosexual, 2 bisexual and 1 lesbian. I have since talked to many more girls about their experiences of their own sexuality. I have reported how when I asked about desire, I have heard all of these girls speak in what I have come to call an erotic voice. That is, they know about girls' sexual desire, most of them feel their own sexual desire, they identify it as embodied, they differentiate it from desire for a relationship though it most often occurs within a relationship,

and they can talk about these powerful feelings, about as well as any of us can.

However, the key finding of my work has been to identify what I call the dilemma of desire. In listening to girls' narratives about their sexual experiences, I heard the underlying question: How can I be considered and consider myself a good, normal and acceptable girl and know and act on my own sexual desire? I have reported how I heard girls respond to this dilemma in three ways: through silent bodies, that is, simply not feeling desire, resisting their own desire, and making a claim to their own desire, while struggling within the conundrum that they were having feelings that they knew they were under pressure not to have or act upon. There was no pattern of race, ethnicity or social location (urban/suburban) in which of these resolutions girls voiced. In listening to girls negotiate this dilemma of desire, I heard the oft-cited description of a non-decision to have sexual intercourse–it just happened–in a new way. I heard "it just happened" is a cover story, a story that a girl could know herself within and tell, in which she is good, normal and acceptable, a story that solves the dilemma of desire by eliminating it from the drama. This dilemma of desire is poignant and is a powerful illustration of how, without a feminist analysis, girls devise individualized solutions to a social problem which are neither very successful nor routes to social change. Since virtually all of the girls whom I've interviewed have voiced desire as a dilemma, I have focused virtually all of my attention on the ways girls deal with this dilemma.

So let me transgress again. In looking back over my own adolescence, the impetus of this work, I know that desire was not a dilemma for me. I never experienced or thought about my own sexual feelings as bad, abnormal or unacceptable. In fact, I nurtured my own desire, I savored these powerful sexual feelings. I have found listening to these girls voice desire as a

dilemma so compelling, that I have in a way lost track of what I actually knew going in to this project: that it is possible for a girl to experience desire without any dilemma. Today I invite you to listen with me to the only girl with whom I have spoken for whom desire is also not a dilemma: I call her Amber. While I do believe she is unusual, I know that she is not alone. By listening to what this girl knows and thinks and feels and is able to do, Amber's experience illustrates how girls' own sexual desire does not necessarily have to be problematic, and that when desire is not a dilemma, it can be an empowering force in girls' lives.

Seventeen-year-old Amber defies neat sociological categories. She goes to a suburban high school, but both of her parents were drug addicts. She lived in a foster home from ages 6-9, then with her Italian grandparents, and at the time of the interview, with a conservative aunt and uncle, for the past 3 years–her cousin was one of the few girls in the school not to be granted parental permission to take sex education. She has dark blonde hair, lively brown eyes, a quick smile, a twinkle in her eye and a very strong local accent. She is wearing a colored t-shirt tucked into belted jeans. I notice that she is neither thin nor heavy, and that she seems very comfortable in her skin. She carries herself with a confidence that is both genuine and appealing. Her sexual knowledge twinned with an openness toward what she hasn't experienced, and her ability to laugh at what is truly funny about the accidental discoveries and mishaps lacing adolescent sexual experience resonate with my own memories. I feel my questions dovetail with Amber's own, that she "gets" this project: "the first thing I said when I got the letter, was like, wow, auntie, you gotta do this. She's like, what is it? I'm like, it's an interview on sexuality and desire, and she's like, on what? and I'm like, sexuality and desire, and she's like, why would you want to do that? I said, because this is something that no one ever talks about, and it would be good to do

this."

Amber is able to articulate her experience of sexual desire especially well, an erotic voice is unmistakable in her descriptions and stories. She describes sexual desire as "kind of like a fire that needs to be put out, (laughing) definitely. Kind of like an itch that needs to be scratched." She is aware of the physical aspects of desire: "I get excited, very excited, just like I don't know how to explain it, I just can tell I get very excited...the same thing must happen to everybody, lubrication, vaginal discharge, you know, you just like get excited...my toes tingle[] [laugh] and the tingling [goes] right through my body like an electric wave." She describes desire as an interplay between her mind and her body: "It evolves from the head, definitely. It's kind of like head to vagina, it's like a little direct signal, but (pause) I think that the heart's involved too, depending on how much you like this person ....I think of desire as more of a mental thing."

She describes her desire as having an overtly relational quality. She has considered masturbating, but "by touching myself or [using a device] I'd be achieving an orgasm, but I think my desire is more to be with someone that to have an orgasm." Neither out of control nor overwhelmed by the raging hormones that we have come to associate with adolescent [read male] sexual desire, while she has had a number of boyfriends, Amber has had sexual intercourse with only one, with whom she had a long and intimate relationship. Unlike in other relationships, when "I wasn't sure if I had wanted to," she says that "when I did I was sure, I wanted to, I mean, I really liked the kid and I wanted to." Her method of birth control is condoms, and, she emphasizes that she uses "one of those spermicidal lubricated condoms" and explains that her choice of this method is because "I'm not that sexually active."

What stands out most in Amber's stories about her sexual experiences is her agency, and

the explicit link she makes between her agency and her own sexual feelings. She tells a story about a time when she felt desire for her now ex-boyfriend: "he looked really good and I just missed him so much and that just combined, I really really wanted him really bad, I actually did get him." And then she proceeds to tell a story of seduction: her seduction of him. "...I forgot what I was wearing, but I had like some kind of skimpy top underneath, and I took it off and I went over to him, and I started putting lotion on my legs... I just like was really close to him, and I was whispering into his ear, and he turns to me 'cause I kind of startled him, and I kissed him, and then it just went on from there." In this story, Amber is an agent of her own desire, taking action on behalf of her feelings. Rather than manipulate him into taking the lead, she takes it herself–"I kissed him." When I ask her what it was like for her to do that, Amber replies "I think I became more confident, I mean, it definitely builds my confidence level, the part of me that makes me outgoing, like brave to face the world, to be able to say things to different people without worrying what they were going to say back, or how they are gonna react." Amber experiences her sexual agency as building her overall confidence, linking her experience in this domain of her life to other relational situations in which she might take a chance by expressing her true feelings.

This story also exemplifies how Amber "works" a system that positions her as a sexual object, by refusing to experience herself in this way yet also using her object status to her own advantage. She has astutely observed that there is power available to her in this system: "I think that women have the power, I think that men 5 percent of the time, I mean the men are really like weak in that sense, they can't seem to turn down an offer from a girl, you know." However, this decision born of desire does not produce the desired or anticipated results–for her, that is.

Reflecting on this story, she says that "I had wanted him back, and I felt that if we had sex that would bring us closer, but you know, it didn't work, I'm like, oh my god, I don't like it, I can't believe I'm doing this, it's actually very boring, I'm like, when is this over...there wasn't anything mystical about it or you know." And I did know. This is not sex that "just happened." At the beginning of the story, Amber is the desiring subject. However, as her desire evaporates, "I kissed him" becomes "when is this over "–that is, with the loss of her desire, Amber transforms from desiring subject into "bored" object. Because Amber feels entitled to and expects her own desire, when the experience becomes "boring" and not "mystical", it is a signal to her that something is amiss. Amber is garnering information she did not have prior to having, and losing, her desire: that she did not really want to be with this boy after all.

For Amber, refusing to wait passively for a boy to be the agent of desire differentiates her from other girls: "I'm always the one to say like, Jimmy, I want you...I think maybe other girls aren't really as forward with talking about sex, I mean I've seen a lot of that in girls, my sister as one, she says, oh wow, I really wanted to do something, he won't do anything, he doesn't kiss that good, I said, well, Lizzy, why don't you pull him aside and say, you know, if it were me and somebody didn't kiss well, I'd be well, do this, do that, or I'd give them hinters and 'cause I mean I just wouldn't sit there and wait for him to pick up on it, he doesn't know what he's doing, you know, maybe he's not aware." Yet she is also aware that being sexually assertive can get a negative response from men, as she observes "I think it's pretty good for, you know, some men feel like the lady is being overly aggressive when they [make the first move], but I've been lucky enough not to have any of those men, but I mean I think it's good for a woman."

Like all of the girls who claimed their own desire in my research, Amber has a critical

perspective on the double standard: "My uncle would talk about whores as if it was the lady's fault and that the lady shouldn't be thinking about sex, that the man is the one that should be thinking about it and they have a right to. I think that's wrong [laugh] I think that ladies should be more forward in the conversations about sex, and definitely do what they feel they would like to. I think it's really up to the lady. You just don't want to put up with that, I mean I know myself if I were to talk about those things my friends might turn and say Ssssh! don't speak too loud, someone might hear you, and it shouldn't be like that at all, I think it should be open to talk about it." Amber has gone so far as to develop a transgressive identity for herself as the girl who says her "perverted" thoughts out loud. She sees herself as 'kind of like relieving the pressures of other people, because other people don't like to talk about it, and they see me talking about and they come and they join the conversation." At once the bad "perverted" girl and the helpful nice girl, Amber eschews these distinctions as she embodies and gives voice to the girl who is a desiring subject.

She notes that when she has heard about girls' sexuality in church or school, she hears that "girls that have sex get in trouble, you know, get pregnant, have AIDS, chlamydia, but I mean usually it's nothing positive." Amber observes that female adolescent sexuality is positioned as entirely negative. Perhaps Amber is able to notice and criticize how "nothing positive" is attributed to girls' sexuality, because her own experiences have been positive. And Amber has a sense of sexuality justice that is notably different from girls for whom desire is a dilemma. She critiques the lack of information about abortion available to her; she critiques our interview as keeping the conversation about desire private, demanding from me recognition of the need for public acknowledgement and talk about girls' desire.

Amber "does desire" with aplomb. And her stories clarify that sexual desire, like all other forms of desire, can be empowering, instrumental in girls' confidence in themselves, essential to their agency, a compass for making decisions about relationships and sexuality, a road to knowledge about self and relationships. While she has a critical perspective on the double standard, as Amber has herself explained, she is an individual, brave and brazen girl, "unique" in her ease with her desire. While Amber knows that she is refusing to comply with a construction of girls as not having desire of their own, or not acting on their own desire, she cannot answer the question of why girls' desire is so forbidden, so maligned. Amber is ripe for a feminist analysis–she can make the observations, which puts her ahead of a lot of girls, but her stories cry out for an interpretive framework. Even within the comfort of her own desire, Amber is aware that her social context considers her "perverted"– a construction which she defies by appropriating it as a fun identity.

In the course of doing this work, I was stopped short one afternoon by an editor's questions, "Why is girls' sexual desire important? Why should anyone care about it?" Amber's transgressions and subversions of what Michelle Fine called the missing discourse of girls' sexual desire provide empirical evidence for why desire matters and underscore girls' ongoing need for feminism. Amber's agency and confidence remind us that we have to engage in the subversive work of making it possible for girls to get beyond "it just happened" by fighting for girls' right to feel and act upon their own sexual feelings without having to be encumbered by the dilemma of desire.